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## **Indigenous Musical Culture in Ghana: A Contemporary Perspective**

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**Abstract:**

*The topicality of this article is based on the indigenous musical culture in Ghana. It was an investigation into the cultural values embedded in the practice of musical genres in these contemporary times. It takes a look at some extra musical discourses embedded in cultural framework and highlights some factors that have retained some of the cultural values in Ghana in spite of extinction of some of the indigenous musical traditions. The paper concludes that the existence of foreign-influenced musical styles in Ghana culminating the use of elements of Ghanaian traditional music to form new recreational and popular styles, obviously has had a tremendous effect on indigenous music demonstrating the trend of musical culture in Ghana. It is appropriate that the introduction of cultural festivals in Ghanaian schools is strengthened to ensure that indigenous music does not face a total extinction.*

**Keywords:** *Indigenous, culture, contemporary, totoeme, hybridity*

### **1. Introduction**

As Ghana progresses with Africa and the rest of the world, the people of Ghana and of African descent are at the crossroad as to which way to go with their indigenous practices (Amenowode, 2003). Most people are seen enjoying much of popular music at the expense of their indigenous music. This might be due to the fact that opportunities for performing traditional music are reducing while opportunities for popular music practice keep on expanding. Musical cultures of some Ghanaian communities are suffering due to the kind of music springing up. Bulk of music produced, played in the media, and performed in the communities, at church, school and at home reflects the situation. There is no dispute that the taste for modern and popular music has over-ridden the love for traditional music among most people in Ghana, especially, the the youth and the literates. Despite these global challenges there are other few traditional musical genres in Ghana that have been sustained. Typical examples are the totoeme music and dance of the Avatime people, the Fante asafo, the Ga kpanlogo as well as ompe of the Effutu of Winneba. The cultural values embedded in the performance of these dances are probably inevitable to face extinction. As the paper looks at contemporary perspective of indigenous musical culture in Ghana, references will be made to existing literature as well as my own research on totoeme music, among the Avatime people (Ewe communities) in Ghana as it incorporates adaptation of traditional and modern forces of culture for its sustenance.

### **2. Literature Review**

In Ghana as elsewhere on the continent there have emerged three schools of thought on the subject of cultural direction. Amenowode (2003) identifies three categories of view points as the “traditional fundamentalist”, the “modernist” and those at the “middle of the road”. Out of these standpoints the first group believes that the culture of Africa is very unique and must be maintained at all cost. The second group feels that African cultures are outdated and should therefore give way to changes dictated by the technological age. The third group however thinks that the way forward is adapting the indigenous cultures to suit modern needs. These schools of thought provide a good reason to look at the contemporary perspective of indigenous musical practice in Ghana.

The divergent stand points about musical culture and cultural practices in indigenous societies have clouded the prevalence of traditional musical culture in local communities. Many communities in Ghana are confronted with the dilemma of either a total acceptance or rejection of their traditions, or acceptance with modifications. From this trend of reasoning, contemporary Ghanaian culture is used in this study to refer to musical and cultural dimensions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Following ideas propounded by Nketia (1974) issues on contemporary culture in this study are based on concepts of the modern society such as the nation state, school-based education, new religions as well as new forms of occupation and association. Such a culture nevertheless contains ingredients of both traditional and the modern society.

Ghanaians regard culture as essential to their lives and future development. Peoples and Bailey (2006) and Nukunya (2003) indicate that culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, customs and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. In general terms culture embodies the philosophy, worldview, behaviour patterns, arts and institutions of a society. Nonetheless, the uses and definitions of ‘culture’ vary reflecting its prestigious association with civilization and social status, its restriction to attitude and behaviour, its globalization and postmodernity. They hold the view about culture as something individuals acquire as members of a society. This means that people obtain their culture from growing up and living among

a particular group. Indeed, relationships are negotiated between the locality and neighbouring chiefdoms and ethnic groups when they socialize (Lentz, 2001). Peoples & Bailey (2006) ascertain from various definitions that culture is learned, shared, largely responsible for group-level differences and necessary to make individuals into complete persons.

Culture can therefore be defined as the totality of the way of life evolved by our people through experience and reflection in our attempt to fashion a harmonious co-existence with our environment. Culture gives a distinct identity to its people. This is emphasized in the Cultural Policy of Ghana (2004, p.3) which states that:

Our culture manifests in our ideals and ideas, beliefs and values; folklore, environment, science and technology, and in the forms of our political social legal and economic institutions. It also manifests in the aesthetic quality and humanistic dimension of our literature, music, dance drama, architecture, carvings, paintings and other artistic forms (NCC, 2004, p.3).

This study has chosen a comprehensive meaning of culture from Ghanaian perspective. Hence, culture is used in this discourse as the total acceptable way of life of a given people. This comprises their modes of thinking, acting and feeling which are expressed in religion, language, law, art, of which music is part, as well as the material products such as houses, clothes, food and tools.

Several scholars have written extensively about Ghanaian indigenous musical culture. Notable scholars include Amoaku (1975, 1985); Agawu (2003); Nketia (1965) and Fiagbedzi (2009) with emphasis on dirges and linguistic interpretation to musicking including meaning of song texts. Nketia (1965) for instance offers a substantial contribution to the field of ethnomusicology comparing the Twi adaptations to the songs with northern influences. He connects many dots to clarify West African regional music's influence in the Akan court music of the present day. On the other hand Agawu (2003) looks at the modes of representation in African 'musics'. He offers emic perspectives on approaches that are appreciative of Ghanaian music practice based on language. Amoaku's (1975) views remind us of the cultural underpinnings that influence the performance of traditional music. He shares insights on the effect of Ewe worldview on the symbolic interpretation of Adavotram music.

### 3. Retention of Indigenous Cultural Values

Historically, several factors have influenced the music of ethnic groups in Ghana. The music has been influenced by language, the environment, a variety of cultures, politics, and population movement, all of which are intermingled. Each ethnic society evolved in a different area of the nation. This means that people from the various ethnic groups eat different foods, face different weather conditions, and come in contact with people of different ethnicity. Each group moved at different rates and to different places than others, and thus each was influenced by different people and circumstances. Furthermore, each society did not necessarily operate under the same government, which also significantly influenced their musical styles. These and other factors seemingly have influenced the musical traditions in Ghana.

The Cultural Policy of Ghana (N. C. C., 2004, P.9) maintains that "our culture manifests in aesthetic quality and humanistic dimension of our literature, music, drama, architecture, carvings, paintings and other artistic forms". From the foregoing, I would consider types of houses found in a community as part of their culture rather than representation or manifestation of cultural knowledge. For example Avatime being an agrarian community have in most of their residential houses kitchens detached from the main edifice which hold the space as bedrooms and living areas. The reason is obvious as modern forms of cooking fuel are not the usual practice or phenomenon. Even in cases where the elite put up modern apartments, relatives who reside in the community as care-takers have their kitchens outside the main building. Another example is the singing of dirges by Avatime women during funeral rites (Osei-Tutu, 1982 & Adipa-Abutiati, 1991). Avatime culture (Ewe culture) requires of the women to sing local dirges to parade the principal streets in their towns as a norm which is still practiced.

Ewe people of Ghana, according to Burns (2009) are currently in the midst of radical and pervasive epistemological transformation from an older, dynamic set of local beliefs and practices. This is true because the introduction of Christianity and Western education in Avatime for instance fruited the emergence of new set of beliefs and practices. Nonetheless, attempts by missionaries to draw a metaphysical boundary to articulate a cosmic battle between forces of good and evil reflected in culture did not yield much. This is reflected in the continued perpetuation of some aspects of cultural practices in Avatime and other areas in Ghana with modifications.

Pursuing their argument, Bowman & Powell (2007) point out that music is a potent tool for the construction and reinforcement of identities – who we are and who we are not. Nonetheless, music has the capacity to leap across boundaries and help individuals reconstruct or restore cultural identity by relocating or reembedding personal identities (Stokes, 1994). There are many kinds of differences in the world; some of which are cultural. Cultures may differ in some aspects and have similarities at the same time.

In discussing music and culture, there are other extra musical discourses that have retained some musical traditions. The indigenous music plays a vital role in the puberty rites of dipo among the Krobo (Opoku, 1978; Djokpe, 2012), bragoro among the Akans (Sarpong, 1999; Acheampong, 1996; Ampene, 2005) which are similar to kusakokɔ (Ewe- avɔtata) among the Avatime. The culture of performing puberty rites extends beyond the borders of Ghana. Puberty rituals are found among the Mende and Vai of Seirra Leone also (Opoku, 1978). It must be noted that societies which practice this culture of initiating their young men and women into adulthood may have different modes of ritual processes, but the concept and the objectives may be the same. In general terms puberty rites are performed to continue the process which the birth rites began; to make the young one into a fully developed person, capable of discharging his/her duties as a conscientious member of the society. Hence, we may find some cultural practices which are common to the ethnic groups in Ghana and elsewhere. In spite of the attempts to retain traditional culture the proliferation of education, information technology and social media in contemporary times have opened the door for borrowed cultures. Nonetheless, Ghanaian traditional culture whose survival is entrenched in the celebration of festivals has caught the attention of Avatime traditional authorities for instance to re-institute the celebration of the Rice festival (Amuna) as a convenient platform on which Avatime culture is displayed in its totality.

As observed by Aborampah (1999, p.267) the contemporary celebration of death has become largely secularized and/or Christianized, but also a major showcase for conspicuous consumption. The amount of the traditional meal prepared and distributed among clan chiefs and queen mothers as well as the number of sympathizers who partake of the food openly display the social class standing of the deceased and the bereaved. One significant aspect is irrespective of the religious affiliation of the deceased and whether the meal is prepared on a large scale or not, the traditional meal has become indigenous culture for traditional occasions (Acheampong, 1996, p.35). The Ghanaian musical culture is retained through the celebration of these cultural settings.

Reiteration is made that the performance of indigenous music occurs as an event in a context of situations. The varying demands of these situations often give rise to musical differentiations embodied in individual items or in a group of such items which constitute an aspect of the musical type being performed. Most cultures in Ghana for instance frown on women playing drums. One of the myths surrounding this taboo is that a female who plays drums is not a potential good cook. This tradition has been sustained even to contemporary times, although this tradition has been broken in some musical genres in Ghana (Acquah, 2013). To corroborate this, *totoeme* music for example is one of the means by which women cross barriers to male dominated traditions like the performance of rituals and total autonomy and control over installation rites. It has a generative power since it is one traditional genre that brings women together with such commitment. It is a symbol of unity as both male and female reflect the make-up of traditional judiciary.

Also, functionally, a traditional music event is anchored on sound and sight through the production of musical sound, and by sight through the expression of gestures that complement the musical activity. All these components put together generate a social interaction between and among the agents of the musical performance. Such interaction is the reason for the performance since the music of traditional society reveals a great deal about their beliefs and sentiments in line with indigenous world view.

#### 4. Indigenous Worldview

According to Battiste and Henderson (2000, p.9) the concept of distinct indigenous worldview recognizes the belief system inspired and protected by indigenous knowledge and values. Such concepts also include the shared belief that indigenous societies are characteristic of creative adaptation of a people to an ecological order. Hence there is an accompanying belief that most aspects of Ghanaian culture are interrelated. In this context, Ghanaian indigenous knowledge is holistic, relational and spiritual, and it originates from multiple sources, including traditional teachings, empirical observations and revelations.

Together and separately, these indicators express Ghanaian indigenous music to other worldviews. It is this uniquely Ghanaian worldview that is captured by indigenous knowledge systems. For example, *Avatime* religious and spiritual worldviews are captured in observations made in Amoaku (1985: 35-6) that no public traditional music-making activity takes place without reference to the gods and spirits, guardians of both the visible and the invisible worlds. For instance, among the Akans of Ghana, libations of alcohol during puberty inform the ancestors of the great occasion as they secure their blessings (Acheampong, 1996, p.35). The desire to protect the initiate in the years ahead, and to ensure her prosperity, fertility, explain the complex use of alcohol, water and blood in Asante puberty rites as well as *Avatime* installation rites for queen mothers.

#### 5. Indigenous Music and Contemporary Culture

The key concepts that form the mainstay of the paper are indigenous music and contemporary culture. Indigenous music in this study is traced to indigenous knowledge. "Indigenous knowledge comprises the complex set of technologies developed and sustained by indigenous civilizations" (Battiste, 2002, p.18). Often oral and symbolic, it is transmitted through the structure of indigenous languages and passed on to the next generation through modeling, practice and animation rather than through the written text (Battiste, 2002). This knowledge includes the history, arts and crafts, stories, music and dance of a society. Hence, indigenous music is considered as the musical art that a local community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment. It includes all aspects of indigenous musical performance such as singing, dancing, drumming and other instrumental skills that make an indigenous musical performance holistic. In some cases indigenous music can be expressed through stories, legends, folklore, rituals and songs. However, in general Ghanaian discourse, the term traditional music and indigenous music are used synonymously. Hence, we may find the two terms used interchangeably.

In throwing some light on the term contemporary culture, may I state here that studying indigenous music in its context definitely has a historical aspect to it. Although the term contemporary designates the study of the present, or the study of the musical phenomenon without the historical dimension, its application in this paper makes incursions into the past. It also helps to understand an existing culture, the socio-economic and political structure of a society. Hence, the contemporary view of indigenous music in Ghana takes a look at the indigenous musical practice in the present.

The performance of some traditional music with its accompanying rituals and the other paramusical discourses might have seen some innovative inputs in the contemporary Ghana. Among them is *Zigi*, a traditional recreational dance for mixed groups found among the people of Asogli area of Northern Eweland (Dzansi, 1994; Agawu, 1995). *Zigi* nearly faced extinction owing to the greater influence of contemporary popular musical forms. However the policy change introduced by the Ghana Education Service in the early 1970's to have the performance of traditional music as part of competitions in cultural arts revived the performance of *Zigi* (Fiagbedzi, 2009).

Another empirical example is seen in Ampene (2005) that *nwonkorɔ* bands are often engaged by state agencies in Ghana to compose songs based on contemporary social and developmental issues. The song for road safety campaign entitled *Adorobafoɔ* (Drivers) by Ama Gyamfua and Su Wo Wu Dam *Nwonkorɔ* Group reflects concerns about drunk driving and speeding on highways. Other compositions have their themes on the importance of formal education and teenage pregnancy among others. It must also be indicated that in recent times, the Akan *bragoro* and its rites are on the way to total extinction (Sarpong 1999) due to exogenous forces. The

musical culture in Ghana has then seen more of establishment of dance ensembles who perform such indigenous dances at certain national programmes. Agawu observes this and writes:

Beginning in the 1960s, musical tradition was invented in Ghana through the establishment of the Arts Council of Ghana, the creation of a National Dance Ensemble, and formation across the country of many so-called cultural troupes. These associations brought together drummers, singers and dancers from different ethnic groups to learn and perform their most popular or most prominent dances. (Agawu, 2003, pg. 35).

Boyer-Dry (2008) corroborates this and states that:

On a national level, the Ghanaian National Dance Ensemble has incorporated the gyl (local name for xylophone) into their repertoire. The national stature of this group has assured gyl music a Ghanaian national identity; it can now be referred to as "Ghanaian music." (Boyer-Dry, 2008, pg. 8)

The infusion of traditional music with other ethnic and international styles has really influenced the musical culture in Ghana. Like Collins (2002) explains, brass-band music became prevalent among the musicians in the Fante areas of Ghana and so people adapted the brass band music to local drums and voice and created a new hybrid of music among Ghanaian musicians. Even in Western musical styles composers during the Romantic period used quotations from folk music, which formed a genre on its own and helped create national styles (Tarasti, 2002). For instance, Brahms cited the Emperor Hymn in the Finale of his piano Sonata in F minor. In the Ghanaian art music also, Kenn Kafui used the Atumpan drums (Ghanaian talking drums) in his orchestral work, Kale (Bravery). The rhythms of the local warriors' music (akpi) from the central part of the Volta Region of Ghana were used to stress the messages of bravery on the introductory section. All these cases represent attempts to embed traditional music elements in contemporary compositions. So it is observed that multiethnic cultural troupes as well as the indigenous musical practitioners in Ghana incorporate elements of popular music into contemporary creation of melodies with themes still on personal life, death, morality, supremacy and continuity.

Some biographical studies have revealed connections between the creation of melodies and events in the lives of composers. A typical example is Akua kra me (Akua bid me farewell) by Yaa Adusa of Manpon Kontonkyi Nnwonkorɔ group (Ampene, 2005, p.42). Yaa attributes the preponderance of the themes of death in their repertory to her personal life. Although such a song may reflect the composer's to personal life experience, members of the community with similar life experiences can relate to it. This represents the reflection of the pain of death and the relevance of the song in the community through the song texts. The power of song texts as communication (Meyer, 1956; Merriam, 1964; Birdwhistell, 1970; Nketia, 1975; Stone, 2008; 2010) has become a cultural medium of societal commentary. This is more prevalent in Ghanaian indigenous dirges. Nonetheless, totoame song texts for instance, have some strong verbal basis to reflect community sentiments (Nketia, 1974, p.189; Saighoe, 1997; Agordoh, 2002, p.44). If there was any common intellectual and emotional meaning, it was certainly not shared by all women and members of the community, nor even all the participants in the various contexts.

Although every community in Ghana continues to enjoy some patronage in the existing indigenous music due to some contexts assigned to them, the proliferation of popular music which predominantly infuses traditional music elements has lowered the prominence of indigenous music giving a new musical hybrid in the Ghanaian society. Canclini (2005, xxv), sees hybridization as a sociocultural process in which discrete structures or practices, previously existing in separate local forms, combine to generate new structures, objects, and practices.

## 6. Conclusion

The task of sustaining indigenous knowledge is certainly more difficult in light of the burdens carried by colonial legacy. Hunter (n.d. p.6) in her study of traditional and Western systems of knowledge observes that "all forms and practices of indigenous knowledge have been negatively impacted by the practices and policies of colonization". The imposition of Western systems of knowledge inherent in the colonial and Christianity (missionary) projects have marginalized and subjugated indigenous traditional knowledge systems of which musical practice is one. This ethnocentric knowledge has been transmitted through legal, government, missionary and academic channels that have over the years undermined and undervalued traditional knowledge systems.

Similarly, Coe (2005) points out the negative underpinnings of Christianity and education on the interactions about Ghanaian culture. Quoting Aggie Brookman, Hunter (n.d.) explains that colonial oppression has contributed to the loss of culture and identity in indigenous communities. Although traditional societies in Ghana are making concerted effort to resist the negative impact of Westernization, it has contributed to mass social upheavals and distress apparent in high rates in teenage pregnancy, substance abuse and troubling health statistics. Nevertheless, Ghanaian societies are aware that the musical arts are a crucial factor in generating and sustaining the traditional systems on which their social order depends. Hence, traditional societies have established festivals, invented musical events or rituals that are celebrated to re-enact traditional arts. In practical terms these indigenous occasions showcase the performance of indigenous music in most parts of the country. For instance, the Aboakyer (deer hunting) festival of the Effutu people of Winneba, celebrated to honour their gods; the Asafotufiam, an ancestral festival of the Ada people; Damba, an Islamic festival in Northern Ghana (Agordoh, 2002), Akwambo festival of which Asafo music is inevitable (Acquah, Amuah & Annan, 2014) and the amuna festival of the Avatime (Ebeli 2014) are occasions characterized by the performance of indigenous music and dance.

It is worth concluding that the new practices emerging from the fusion of diverse cultural elements may be impressive or unimpressive, according to the schools of thoughts discussed earlier on, however, such musical forms may continue to demonstrate the trend of musical culture in Ghana. Therefore, following the trend of contemporary developments in indigenous musical practice, it is becoming acceptable that musicians have always adapted and reformed traditional musical practices in response to the changing dynamics of their culture, thus, reflecting the contemporary musical culture existence. To make the indigenous music stay in Ghana,

the traditional dances accepted in the cultural festivals in schools are a welcome idea to ensure cultural continuity. This implies that there is a fertile ground for the indigenous musical genres to flourish in future (Dowoeh, 1980).

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